FOOD & LIVING

The Myths of Medicinal Ivory

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I don't remember much from my first trip to Thailand, except being in a room full of elephant products with a swarm of Chinese tourists. Perhaps it was because there was such a stark contrast in excitement levels between the rest of the room and me. My family, along with the busload of Chinese folks, had anticipated this visit for days. As a middle schooler at the time, I had no idea why people were so wired and ready to spend.

There were notebooks and purses made with elephant skin. And then there was the "white gold," the elaborate statues made of ivory. My parents gawked at a two-foot-long tusk with seven miniature elephants carved into it, linked together by their

trunks and pulling, as if for dear life, on an engraved tree.

Elephant tusks have always been prized by the Chinese. China is the world's largest importer of smuggled tusks. The art of carving ivory dates back to the Shang Dynasty (1800 BCE - 1100 BCE) and later, during the Zhou Dynasty (1100 BCE - 256 BCE), when craftsmen were divided into eight groups according to the materials used. Ivory was one of eight, along with pearl, jade, stone, wood, metal, leather, and feather. According to the New York Times, in 2006, the Chinese government added ivory carving to its official Intangible Cultural Heritage register, along with opera, kung fu, and acupuncture. Today, China is the biggest market, followed by the United States. According to Traffic, a wildlife trade monitoring network, every day, an average of two Chinese nationals are arrested for smuggling it.

An estimated 30,000 or more elephants a year are killed for the trade. In February, China imposed a one year moratorium on the good and in the United States, the trade is coming close to a complete ban.

Myths
Changes color upon contact with poisoned food
Gives skin a luminous glow
Clears heat
Good for treating epilepsy
Heals sores and boils
Good for sore throat
Relieves anal fistula
Treats consumptive fever
Relieves osteoporosis
Helps with excessive bone growth

While it's mostly sold as jewelry or in statue form, ivory is also used as a Chinese medicinal ingredient. There are stories of emperors who believed ivory chopsticks would change color upon contact with poisoned food. Tusk powder is said to have detoxifying properties, giving skin a luminous glow when consumed. If you search ivory powder in Chinese, you might come across a list of the "healing" properties of the powder. "Clear heat and relieve convulsions, remove toxicity and promote tissue regernation [sic]," the site reads. "Epilepsy, convulsions, sores and boils, sore throat, anal fistula, consumptive fever."

On another site written in Chinese, the anti-epileptic powers of ivory are emphasized. The tusks have a good amount of calcium phosphate, it

reads. It can be used as an anti-convulsant and to help heal sore throats.

Like most Chinese medicine, it's usually paired with other ingredients as a treatment. On that same website, there's an excerpt from a book called *Y?xué Rùmén*, a Chinese medicine textbook that dates back to the Ming Dynasty. There's a recipe to cure ulcers in there. The ingredients: ivory, turtle shell, and hedgehog skin. Ground it all up, it instructs, and shape it into a pill no larger than a cherry.

If you search patents, you'll find more modern formulas for ivory powder in China. In 2000, a patent was granted for a pill to supposedly relieve osteoporosis. The ingredients: angelica, Achyranthes (a medicinal plant), complanatus (a type of snail), and ivory. In 2006, a patent for pure ivory pills was granted to cure bone tuberculosis.

More troubling is this patent for hyperostosis, or excessive bone growth, that was filed in 2009:

"The invention relates to a traditional Chinese medicine for treating hyperosteogeny, which is characterized in that the contents of raw materials are as follows: 20-40 g of radix achyranthis bidentatae, 20-40 g of radix angelicae pubescentis, 20-40 g of tribulus terrestris L., 20-40 g of ivory powder and 20-40 g of root of common peony; all raw materials are grinded [sic] into 27 parts, 27 goose eggs are used, a small hole is dug on each goose egg, one third of the

content of each goose egg is poured out, the machine power is added in the goose eggs to stir uniformly, the goose eggs are cooked by steam in a boiler; and a patient eats one goose egg before sleep every day. The invention has advantages of low cost of raw materials and good effect for treating hyperosteogeny, thereby reducing the financial burden of the patient."

That patent ended up being rejected.

Ivory in Chinese medicine form isn't popular in the United States. I asked my family's Chinese medicine doctor about ivory in medicine and she said she never heard of a case like that in her life. "We do use buffalo horns," she said, and promptly sent me a link to a site that explains the benefits. It's different though -- buffalo and even rhino horns (which are illegal) are made out of keratin, a protein found in hair and fingernails.

Ivory can still be found in Los Angeles, mostly as statues and as jewelry. In California, it is illegal to sell ivory that has been brought to the U.S. after 1977, but many people are still doing it under the table. It's easy to buy -- you just have to know where to go. Kristie Hang, a freelance journalist in L.A. working on an investigative piece on ivory, did just that.

"I went to several Los Angeles stores under the guise of looking for a birthday gift for my grandmother," she says. "I told them that I needed to shoot cell phone video of the ivory to

show my mom to get her sign off on the gift. One of the stores went into the back room and got out a shoe box." Inside was an ivory necklace for sale for $290.

According to a 2014 study, L.A. and San Francisco have the largest ivory markets in the U.S. The study found, within a span of a month, over 1,250 ivory items offered for sale by 107 vendors in California, with 777 items and 77 vendors in L.A. and well over 473 ivory items and 30 vendors in San Francisco.

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Last month, China announced a one-year moratorium on the import of ivory carvings after years of

international pressure. But critics say that's not enough. In January, China crushed a pile of tusks reportedly weighing over six tons, but some of the crushed ivory powder was reportedly "preserved." Speculation was that it would be used for traditional Chinese medicine.

Does ivory used in the form of Chinese medicine actually work?

It all depends on who you ask.

"Perhaps the greatest damage that has come to [traditional Chinese medicine] in the past few hundred years as traditional remedies are being prescribed for ailments they were never meant to treat. Things like rhinoceros horn and elephant tusk are being prescribed for infertility as a [traditional Chinese medicine] cure, despite that this actually goes against the tradition," writes China Change, a news blog on Chinese issues.

It all comes down to this: ivory is a status symbol, embedded into Chinese tradition with a value that is driven higher by its rarity. To change the mind of the Chinese, it's all about awareness.

Steps towards this have already been taken. Former NBA player Yao Ming, for example, has spoken out against

the ivory trade and is a wildlife activist of sorts appearing in numerous commercials against ivory and shark's fin soup.

Actor Jackie Chan, too, has been outspoken against the trade. The campaigns seem to be working. According to WildAid, in 2014, there was a 51.5% increase in those who believed that elephant poaching is a problem.

In my family, that awareness has definitely hit.

"Who eats that?" my Chinese father responded incredulously when I asked him about eating ivory powder. "Elephants are like pandas now. Almost extinct. No one eats pandas."

No. At least, not anymore.

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